TELLS THE FACTS AND NAMES THE NAMES

CounterPunch

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The Class Struggle in France

By Larry Portis

Montpellier

Flower power dans la gueule – "Flower power in your face!" This was my favorite slogan seen at the demonstration in Montpellier, France, on October 16, 2010. It emblazoned a cardboard sign and was carried by a young girl with curly hair and a headband. At the bottom of the sign was printed in very large capital letters: Tous ensemble pour la Grève Generale – "All together for the General Strike."

Curious, I asked the girl about the sign, and about the reverse side on which was written, "Never trust a hippy" ("Ne fais jamais confiance aux hippies.") "Is this really a problem?" I asked, "Are there still hippies around?" Respectful of my age, she hesitated to respond, before saying, "Yes, there are. We are the hippies." She is 15 years old and, I found, as capable of discussing the issues of neoliberal reform of public institutions in France as anybody. At least people like her understand what might be called simple common sense. Students at all levels and young workers know that requiring people to work longer, as the retirement reform proposed by the Sarkozy government calls for, will result in fewer jobs for the young.

This is an ineluctable deduction, but one avoided by almost all French politicians. Even the French Socialist Party, for example, also accepts that the retirement age must be raised, in accordance with the decisions of the sacrosanct European Union. Only the more radical organizations, such as the Communist Party, the Greens, the New Anti-Capitalist Party (former Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire) and, of course, revolutionary unions and political formations like the CNT (Confédération Nationale du Travail), Alternative Libertaire, Lutte

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Britain's Tri-Partisan Electoral Monolith
Slash-and-Burn Tory Coalition Picks Up Where New Labour Left Off

By Susan Watkins

London

The interregnum between the Crash of 1929 and the banking collapses and defaults of 1931, which ushered in the Great Depression, exerts an eerie fascination today: where are we now, along the path from the Wall Street meltdown of September 2008?

With a depressed Atlantic core, its financial system sodden with bad debt, and a bubbling South, policies are set to diverge. The Obama administration is pursuing a Reaganomics strategy: lower the dollar to make exports and boost the current account, while running a large fiscal deficit to prop up the financial sector. China, knowing very well what Reagan and Baker's 1985 Plaza Accord did to Japan, fears the decimation of its export sector. Fast-growing Southern economies, from Brazil to India, struggle to control destabilizing inflows of capital. In Europe, while mainstream economists are divided over policy, political elites and central bankers are virtually unanimous on the need for austerity.

As under New Labour, so under the new Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition, London's aim is to be the vanguard in this. There is no convincing economic rationale for the unprecedented four-year fiscal squeeze premised in New Labour's March 2010 budget, trumpeted in the emergency budget in June put forth by the new governing coalition and now detailed in the October 20 Spending Review, laid out by the new Conservative Chancellor George Osborne. Unlike Greece or Ireland, the U.K.'s borrowing costs are not soaring and the recessionary effects of the squeeze on government revenues will likely match the reductions in spending, leaving the deficit almost as wide as before.

Britain's draconian cuts only make sense in the context of a broader program: to shore up the financial sector, at any cost, and to use the crisis to ram through a wish list of structural reforms. It was easy enough for the incoming Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition to present its Coalition Agreement as slightly to the left of New Labour: a bill to roll back Blair's surveillance state, an inquiry into British collusion in extraordinary rendition and torture, a mildly redistributive capital gains tax; Cameron made it clear that he was unenthusiastic about the war in Afghanistan. But once securely installed in office, with the unprecedented guarantee of a 5-year fixed term brokered by Whitehall chiefs, the Coalition has moved right to occupy New Labour's ground – relaunching the New Labour revolution in health, welfare and education, which had petered out after the trauma of September 2008, with renewed vigor, as part and parcel of the £80 billion cuts program.

The results will be catastrophic, as Blairite marketization policies are deepened in conditions of savage public-expenditure cuts. Osborne's Spending Review expects to make half a million public-sector workers redundant; the accounting firm PwC estimates nearly half a million more private-sector jobs will go as well, due to reduced public-sector demand and lower household spending – raising British unemployment to around 3.5 million, well into double digits, and higher than the notorious jobless rates of the Thatcher years. The governor of the Bank of England reckons it will stay there

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Ouvrière, and the Fédération Anarchiste call for real progressive fiscal reform, the reduction of work time, and other radically structural changes.

We can analyze the facetious slogans as we wish, and there are thousands of them, conceived and formulated with humor and creativity. Whenever a movement in France lasts for more than a few weeks, there is an impressive explosion of imaginative sloganeering, the commandeering of popular songs provided with new and politically pointed lyrics (often far better than the originals), and street theater of all types.

I've been to almost all the recent demonstrations in France, at least since 1986, when French students forced the government to withdraw a reform of entrance requirements to universities. What I have observed during these numerous occasions to participate in mass mobilizations is what I learned during long-ago graduate studies focused on the history of France and its popular movements, and the ideas that accompany them or react to them – there is a revolutionary tradition in France.

And yet, paradoxically, I'm always surprised. For, in between the movements, I habitually lament the progressive loss of critical consciousness in France, the emergence of new pernicious forms of media distraction (typically originated in the United States), the fact that there are more McDonalds restaurants per capita in France than elsewhere in the E.U., the dumbing-down of education, and all the other symptoms of consensual one-dimensionalism.

But this is what a revolutionary tradition means. Regardless of adaptations to technological change, rebellious attitudes to authority persist. Popular uprisings in France are part of a heritage going back at least to the seventeenth century.

Resistance grows when a centralized state forces the populace to steadily give up more and more of its personal liberties and resources. In the present context, a good part of these liberties and resources are to be found in the fruit of former struggles. The eight-hour day and paid vacations were won through hard popular struggle in 1936. The resistance movements during the wartime occupation and then the Liberation in 1945 gave birth to the present system of social security, public health services, and retirement benefits. These institutional changes quickly came to be considered inalienable social rights.

The present government in France has pledged to overturn the situation. Privately, already in 2007, president Nicolas Sarkozy said he would be the French Margaret Thatcher. He would force through fundamental changes, reducing the power of the political left and "modernizing" France by dismantling state-financed social programs. During his campaign, he declared, "In this election, the question is to know whether the legacy of May '68 is to be perpetuated or if it must be liquidated once and for all."

With his careful efforts to dissimulate his allegiance to powerful industrial and financial interests, Sarkozy impressed much of the electorate. He assured the young that he would provide jobs and increase purchasing power. He pledged to the seniors that he would crack down on crime and provide security for all. By recruiting members of the Socialist Party and carefully selected individuals from ethnic minorities to his new government, Sarkozy posed as a leader above political parties – neither right nor left. After several months in office, he divorced his wife and quickly married a former top model and pop-idol-groupie turned singer (with the help of her family connections and fabulous inherited wealth). "Super Sarko" was born.

It might have worked. But then, in 2008, a bit more than one year after his election, the crash of the New York Stock Exchange changed everything for Super Sarko. People in France, as elsewhere, began asking questions: Why are the banks and other financial institutions being given assistance, and not ordinary people? Why must the universities become unequal in status? Why are the numbers of schoolteachers being reduced when it is generally understood that more are needed? Why are post offices and railroad lines closed? Will programmed privatization really result in better services?

At the same time, more and more information about Sarkozy's connections to the industrial and financial elites became known. On the night of his election, he gave a party for them in one of the most expensive restaurants in Paris. Sarkozy is a funny little man with a large ego, and he tends to call ridicule onto himself. Soon he became the butt of jokes, and the object of scurrilous speculations about his need to vaunt his virility and to demean his subordinates. Sarkozy came to be the most despised French president in recent history. Today his approval rating is in the vicinity of 26 per cent.

Far more important than Sarkozy's peccadilloes is what he represents socially. He is the point man for what the sociologists Michel Pinçon and Monique Pinçon-Charlot call the French oligarchy. In September 2010, one month ago, these authors published *Le president des riches. Enquête sur l'oligarchie dans la France de Nicolas Sarkozy* (tr. The President of the Rich: Investigation of the Oligarchy in Nicolas Sarkozy's France). The book establishes incontrovertibly that Sarkozy does the bidding of the powerful employers association (MEDEF – Movement of French Enterprises) and the financial elites. His personal power base, in the exclusive western suburb of Paris of Neuilly and the business center of La Défense, is a center of rampant political corruption and nepotism.

What distinguishes Sarkozy is his unadulterated contempt for people in general and poor people in particular. It took French people (or, at least the 71 per cent of the French population supportive of the present mobilization in the streets)

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for a decade. With welfare spending, higher education and local council services (community care, libraries, swimming pools) the main target, the social pain of unemployment will be intensified. Small businesses, already starved of credit, will be hit by falling demand; the insolvency firm R3 estimates that 150,000 small firms may close. In the *Financial Times,* Martin Wolf – one of many establishment economists to oppose the scale of the cuts – estimates that the four-year plan may see the economy contract by up to 2 per cent of GDP per year.

Though British commentators have been smugly congratulating the country on the lack of Greek- or French-style protests, struggles of some sort are bound to erupt. But even more, perhaps, than in Greece and France, their effects will be blunted by the absence of any effective political spearhead. The Thatcherization of the Labour Party, followed by the Blairization of the Tories and by the Cameronization of the Liberal Democrats, has created a monstrously homogenized electoral monolith. The tri-partisan consensus is evident in every aspect of government policy. Thus:

• **Welfare benefits and pensions:** in 2007, investment banker David (now Lord) Freud, appointed by New Labour to reduce the benefits bill, recommended replacing the various crumbs – housing benefit, incapacity benefit, disability allowance – with a single, means-tested payment linked to harsh "incentives to work." Tory Welfare Minister Iain Duncan-Smith is enthusiastically driving the plan forward, implementing at the same time an £18 billion reduction in payments and the downgrading of inflation-linked benefit increases.

• **Higher education:** in 1998, Blair's government imposed fairly nominal tuition fees on students (a policy resisted by then Conservative PM John Major) as the thin end of the wedge; in 2004, it hiked the fees substantially, claiming that "those who benefited" from higher education should fund it themselves, and set up low-interest student loans to pay for them – fresh fields for the financial sector. Responsibility for universities was duly shifted from the Department of Education to the Ministry for Business. In 2009, New Labour appointed the ex-CEO of BP, Lord Browne, to "reform" higher education. His proposals – that teaching subsidies be cut by over 70 per cent; students pay commercial rates on their loans; universities be free to hike fees at will, or compete like businesses in price-cutting against each other to attract students, with inevitable college bankruptcies and closures – will now be implemented by the LDP minister for business, Vince Cable. The Liberal Democrats, who promised to abolish tuition fees altogether in their 2010 manifesto, have been bought off, as cheaply as Labour's "left" under Blair and Brown, with low-level – but well-salaried – parliamentary appointments.

• **Health:** since New Labour had already insisted the National Health Service (NHS) find £20 billion savings within its current budget to cope with the expanding number of elderly patients and drug price rises over the next four years, the Coalition could claim to be ring-fencing health expenditure. But Health Secretary Andrew Lansley has already broken the Coalition pledge to put an end to New Labour's permanent revolution in top-down administrative restructuring, which has brought a vast increase in form-filling, to the detriment of patient care, as medical personnel are forced to spend their time managing the NHS's "internal market."

The Thatcherization of the Labour Party, followed by the Blairization of the Tories and now by the Cameronization of the Liberal Democrats, has created a monstrously homogenized electoral monolith.

• **Defense:** famously, New Labour's two brand-new aircraft carriers will be spared from Osborne's cuts, at a cost of some £5 billion, since it would be "too expensive" to break the contracts.

Staggeringly, the younger Miliband's victory over his brother in September's Labour leadership contest was greeted by some on the British left as a sign of hope. Seumas Milne, erstwhile *Guardian* comment editor and long-time comrade-in-arms of ex-Respect Party MP George Galloway, hailed Ed Miliband's election as "a significant shift beyond New Labour politics" – "that he represents a real change is not in question" – and "an unmistakeable breach in the stifling neoliberal consensus that has dominated British politics." Miliband's maiden speech as Opposition leader – pledging to stand with the Cameron-Clegg government on Afghanistan – and his Blairite shadow cabinet should have banished such delusions.

The obvious candidate for shadow chancellor was Ed Balls, a former *Financial Times* editorial writer and tough-minded pugilist, who has denounced the cuts program as a monumental economic blunder on a par with Churchill's disastrous return to the gold standard in 1925 or John Major joining the European Exchange Rate Mechanism in 1990. As shadow chancellor, Balls would have provided legitimation for workers, students and pensioners fighting the cuts – demolishing the Lib-Tory claim that austerity is "in the national interest." This was the appointment Clegg and Cameron dreaded. Miliband duly

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Defeat on the Yellow River

The Debacle of the San Men Xia Dam

By Peter Lee

The Yellow River is the second longest river in China (after the Yangtze), running 3,395 miles from the Bayan Har Mountains in western China through nine provinces before emptying into the Bohai Sea. Its basin has been the cradle of northern Chinese civilizations. Every year it picks up a burden of hundreds of millions of tons of silt, as it courses through the loess plateaus of western China. As the river enters the plains of central China and slows, much of that silt drops out. The silt sinks to the bottom of the river, building up the bed, decreasing the distance from the bed to the top of the riverbank, and reducing the volume of water the watercourse can handle.

When nature takes its course, somewhere the riverbank is overtopped by some combination of silt buildup and floodwaters; the overflow chews through the riverbank in some inopportunely low-lying area, and the waters gush out into the surrounding countryside searching for a new path to the sea.

However, nature hasn't taken its course on the Yellow River – without determined human intervention, in any case – for over two thousand years. Massive earthworks, raised by Chinese governments, local gentry, and peasants over the centuries, have sought to confine the Yellow River to its channel. As silt has built up on the riverbed for centuries, the levees got higher and higher, the bed got higher and higher. Today, at many places on the central plain the Yellow River is a "hanging river," its riverbed as much as 25 meters higher than the surrounding countryside.

In the case of a "hanging river," the earthen structures are properly called dikes, not levees, because they confine the river to its course during times of normal flow and not just during periods of flood. To keep it in its bed, the dikes and levees have to be raised every ten years. In modern China, construction and maintenance of the dikes and levees costs an average of $300 million per year.

If a dike is breached, the entire river escapes. Approximately one hundred million people live and work on the flood plains in the shadow of the river. The Yellow River, obeying its own laws of hydrological necessity, has left its bed and changed its course on an average of twice a century for the last one thousand years. For China's rulers, controlling the Yellow River and assuring the safety and prosperity of the hundreds of millions of people living in its basin have been a benchmark of achievement, virtue, and regime legitimacy ever since the mythical emperor Yao was credited with mastering the river in the second millennium B.C.E.

In 1938, Chiang Kai-shek took the opposite tack, with disastrous consequences. He breached the dike at Zhengchou city in Henan, a key rail link on the Yellow River threatened by the Japanese advance. The river roared southeast into one of its old channels, spreading out to inundate 21,000 square miles of land in a tobacco-leaf shaped area more than 250 miles long and over 100 miles wide in the process.

"The Yellow River is one of the most potent symbols in Chinese history; failure to control it is a sign that a government is about to lose the mandate of heaven…"

The Japanese armies approaching Zhengchou from the east were seriously if temporarily discommoded as a result. However, because Chiang Kai-shek had wished to preserve the element of surprise, no warning was given to the people in the flood zone; and because of the government's dire straits, few effective relief efforts were taken afterward. Over 500,000 peasants – and, perhaps, as many as one million – died as a result, either directly from the inundation or from starvation and disease in the subsequent famine.

The Yellow River ran south for nine years. After World War II, even as Chiang Kai-shek was locked in a mortal struggle with the Chinese Communist Party, the West and Chang's Kuomintang (KMT), government hurried to repair the one-kilometer breach at ZhengChou, and the damage it had inflicted on the KMT's credibility as a legitimate and responsible ruler. In her book, *The Chinese People at War: Human Suffering and Social Transformation, 1937-1945* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), Diana Lary of the University of British Columbia writes:

"The Yellow River is one of the most potent symbols in Chinese history; failure to control it is a sign that a government is about to lose the mandate of heaven… After the Japanese had withdrawn, it was essential for the GMD [Guomindang, or KMT] to heal the breach at Huayuankou… Closure of the breach was identified as an urgent task… it was named one of the major projects in China for the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency (UNRRA)."

The breach was buttoned up in 1947 at a stated cost of 592 billion yuan (an indication of the inflation problems bedeviling Chiang Kai-shek's government). In a recapitulation of the blithe indifference of the original flooding – and a foreshadowing of the problems at San Men Xia reservoir – no provision was made for relocating the 400,000 peasants who had poured into the abandoned river bed over the previous nine years. The calculation appears to have been that these peasants were headed into the arms of the Chinese Communists – who already controlled the area north of the Yellow River – anyway.

After their triumph in 1949, China's Communist rulers eagerly took up the challenge to control the Yellow River. Today, sixty-one years after the Communists took power, it is still by no means clear that they can claim a victory. And they have already acknowledged one major defeat – the debacle of the San Men Xia Dam. The story – an epic of suffering, cruelty, incompetence, and indifference – is told in an unprecedented piece of reporting by the journalist Xie Chaoping in his Chinese-language book, *The Great Relocation.* The book came out in August in the face of determined efforts to block its publication, and has circulated in China and on the Internet in virtually samizdat form. It also earned Xie a month of extralegal detention by a local government he had sorely offended with the aggressive accuracy of his re-

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porting.

The Great Relocation exhaustively chronicles the suffering of the 285,000 peasants who voluntarily relocated to make way for the San Men Xia Dam reservoir and have endured 50 years of poverty, misrule, and financial and political exploitation as a result. At the same time, Xie draws on published sources and his own reporting to offer an unprecedented perspective on the reign of folly that led to the construction of the dam. Xie writes that a prophecy was eagerly recounted in China in the 1950s, "When the sage appears, the Yellow River will run clear." Enter Chairman Mao. The Chairman visited the great dikes at ZhengChou, site of Chiang Kai'shek's debacle, in 1952, and was briefed on "China's Sorrow" by Wang Huayun, in charge of Yellow River conservancy.

During the rule of Chiang Kai-shek, a team of American hydrologists led by the chief engineer of the Army Corps of Engineers had surveyed the river and evaluated the three choke points in western Henan, at which a dam could be constructed: San Men Xia; where the river first emerged from the highlands and entered the province; or downstream at Bali Hutong or Xiaolangdi. The U.S. team recommended that first priority in dam location and design should be flood control – building a dam with sufficient surge capacity in its reservoir to hold back floodwaters that would otherwise overtop the dikes and flood the countryside downstream. The dam would be designed with proper measures to flush sediment downstream to prevent the silting of its reservoir.

Since a dam at San Men Xia would flood some of China's most productive farmland, it was recommended that the dam be built at Bali Hutong, whose reservoir would then flood a relatively unproductive and unpopulated area of gorges. However, Wang had a different idea. He told Mao of his ambitious plan to solve the silting problem at its root with a dam design that would both control flooding and entrap silt. The most logical place to build such a dam appeared to be at the furthest upstream point, San Men Xia.

In the frothy exuberance and hubris of the early People's Republic, it was believed that the political will of the Communist Party, an overwhelming commitment to the people's livelihood, and the liberating influence of socialism on scientific thought were necessary and sufficient conditions for achieving the goal that had eluded China's feudal rulers and the KMT – "making the Yellow River run clear." Because there was no consideration for maintaining a rapid, silt-clearing flow through the dam, there was no theoretical obstacle to raising the dam, making the reservoir higher as well as bigger, and generating immense amounts of electricity. Therefore, the dominant "high dam" faction in the Ministry of Hydrology promoted a gigantic project: a dam 360 meters high, backed by a reservoir 350 meters high, which would displace nearly one million people; and a power plant equipped with 1.2 megawatts of generating capacity – roughly equivalent to the generating capacity of the entire country in 1949.

"You say, 'When a sage appears, the Yellow River will run clear.' I say, the Yellow River cannot run clear. If the Yellow River runs clear, it is not an achievement; it is a crime."

The financial and technical means for this historic project were to be provided by the Soviet Union, as part of its program of economic assistance to the People's Republic of China in the 1950s. The Soviet Union has subsequently served as a convenient scapegoat for Chinese Communist apparatchiks and Chinese patriots. The Russians have been accused of insufficient experience with silt-laden rivers, an obsession with the engineering challenge of dam building over the critical hydrology of reservoir construction, general intellectual laziness, and a disregard of their obligation to provide technical guidance to their untutored and compliant Chinese counterparts.

However, the detailed account presented in Xie Chaoping's book indicates that the Soviet engineers possessed a healthy and practical appreciation of the dangers of silting. A simple calculation of the colossal silt load of the Yellow River and the volume of the reservoir, combined with the design assumption that virtually all of the silt would be entrapped behind the dam, gave the San Men Xia reservoir an expected life of less than a decade. The only practical way to extend the life of the reservoir would be to reduce the amount of silt reaching San Men Xia by building silt-entrapping dams upstream and by reducing erosion in the watershed. The Chinese Ministry of Hydrology proposed a series of five small and five large dams that, combined with improved agricultural and reforestation practices, were to reduce the amount of silt in the upper reaches of the Yellow River by 50 per cent by 1967, and by 100 per cent in fifty years. The Soviet engineers considered these numbers – apparently pulled from thin air, without benefit of any models or statistics – ludicrous. Thereupon, the Chinese hydrologists, in a measure that will be instantly recognizable to any capitalist who has tweaked the future earnings assumptions on a spreadsheet in a spirit of groundless optimism, simply cut the ludicrous numbers in half, assuming that somehow the influx would be reduced by 25 per cent by 1967 and 50 per cent afterward.

The Russians, not terribly interested in the minutiae or reality of upstream silt control and eager to start work on the gigantic project, accepted the Chinese numbers and cleared the way for construction of the dam with Russian funding, equipment, and technical assistance. In June 1957, Chou En-lai arranged a sign-off meeting for 70 Chinese experts at the Beijing Hotel. One expert, Huang Wanli, refused to go along, and his dissent assumed legendary proportions. Huang was a professor at Qinghua University at the time of the debate. However, he was intimately familiar with the characteristics of the Yellow River upstream of the dam thanks to a stint as the head of the Gansu Province Hydrology Bureau. An opinionated, straightforward man, he was also given to gnomic utterances such as "Rivers have their own intrinsic value; so, they have their own rights." He told Chou En-lai, "You say, 'When a sage appears, the Yellow River will run clear.' I say, the Yellow River cannot run clear. If the Yellow River runs clear, it is not an achievement; it is a crime." He was the only expert to oppose the dam on principal, presciently predicting that the dam would not stop floods; it would merely shift their locus to behind the dam, on the upper reaches of the Yellow River. In addition, four experts took issue with the

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height of the dam in light of the immense burden of relocating upward of 890,000 peasants to make way for the reservoir. However, the central government's enthusiasm for the dam was not to be gainsaid, and the State Council approved the project and notified the ministries and localities accordingly.

Huang Wanli did not fare well in the aftermath of the conference. He was dissatisfied with the unscientific tenor of the proceedings, and also not happy with the progress of Chairman Mao's Hundred Flowers movement. Shortly after the meeting, Huang published a short novel in a Qinghua University magazine. A passage vigorously criticized the incompetence of Beijing Municipality's road building efforts (apparently, improper construction techniques had caused big potholes and cracking of road surfaces in the capital). Huang, who had advanced degrees in engineering from two U.S. universities, asserted that similar failures in the United States would have led to a taxpayer revolt and the defeat of the mayor at the next elections, but in China "we're good at talking." As a prologue to the novel, Huang added an allusive poem referring regretfully to early chills blighting the spring blooms. Huang's excursion into analogy, metaphor, and symbolism did not escape Chairman Mao, who annotated Huang's production with the indignant and disgusted remark, "What is this?"

Thereupon, Huang became one of the main targets of Mao's anti-Rightist campaign, and a column dedicated to denouncing rightists entitled "What Is This?" became a regular feature in *People's Daily*. Huang's position at Qinghua was downgraded. He was capped as a rightist (grumbling, "Galileo was tossed into jail, but the Earth still revolves around the Sun!"), and sent off to labor reform at the Miyun Reservoir in the outskirts of Beijing.

In 1959, in the Lushan Plenum that saw Mao's savage counterattack on critics of the Great Leap Forward and marked the true beginning of the Cultural Revolution, Mao menacingly lumped Huang together with archfoe Peng Dehuai as "Chinese who think everything is better in America, even the moonlight is better..." Remarkably, Huang Wanli – though he and his family were subjected to extremely rough handling – was not subjected to the ferocious abuse amounting to judicial murder that Mao inflicted on his other high-profile enemies such as Peng and Liu Shaoqi. Huang's father was an important political figure in the National People's Consultative Congress, the post-Revolution united front organ, and Mao also genuinely appreciated Huang Wanli's literary attainments.

At one time, Huang had the chance to be de-capped, but he defiantly refused and spent the Cultural Revolution cleaning privies at the San Men Xia Dam. He survived and became publicly identified as the leading technical voice against China's other enormous dam project, the Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze, before he died in 2001. While Huang was going through his travails, the province of Shaanxi was working energetically to modify, if not stop, the San Men Xia project. The dam was in Henan, but the reservoir, with its problems, was in Shaanxi. Shaanxi would lose thousands of hectares of its richest farmland and hundreds of thousands of its peasants would have to be relocated. The province was stubborn in its opposition to the dam.

Chairman Mao contributed his two-fen worth, telling Zhou Enlai, "If San Men Xia isn't working out, then blow it up."

Chou En-lai journeyed to the dam construction site and convened another meeting. Shaanxi's outcries had an effect. It was promised that the reservoir height would not exceed 340 meters, instead of the original 350 meters; and the elevation of some relief tunnels was lowered, so more silt could be carried out of the reservoir. Construction proceeded and relocation continued, albeit on a reduced scale. Relocation of 285,000 peasants from some of the most fertile land in China to wastelands in Ningxia and northern Shaanxi turned into the degrading and immiserating botch chronicled in Xie Chaoping's book.

As to the vital issue of upstream silt control, apparently no serious efforts were made, possibly because of the disruptions of the Great Leap Forward campaign and possibly because of a generally reactive ethos: build the dam and see what happens. The San Men Xia Dam was commissioned with great fanfare in 1960. Problems emerged quickly enough. Over the next year and a half, an astounding 1.5 billion tons of silt poured into the reservoir and stayed there. Not only was the reservoir well on its way to disappearing completely in a few years – and turning the dam into "Asia's largest waterfall," in the words of one observer – the slowed-down river flow was knocking silt out of the water in the tributaries that fed the Yellow River behind the dam as well. Upstream riverbeds lurched up as much as 4.5 meters, and an immense sandbar formed at the mouth of the Yellow River's most important tributary, the Wei, which cuts through the heartland of Shaanxi. A finger of silt crept up the Wei toward Shaanxi's provincial capital, Xian, cutting the carrying capacity of the riverbed in half and bringing with it the threat of inundation of one of China's major industrial centers at the next flood.

In 1962, only two years after commissioning the dam, its reservoir held 1.8 billion tons of silt (having been able to discharge only 110 million tons downstream). The State Council approved modification of the dam's operating method to "flood prevention and silt discharge," and the experts were convened to try to find a way to do this. Chairman Mao contributed his two-fen worth, telling Chou En-lai, "If San Men Xia isn't working out, then blow it up." Through this exhibition of imperial insouciance, Mao essentially washed his hands of the project, leaving Chou with the headache of solving the problem and responsibility for whatever consequences his solution entailed.

With the reservoir problems, it was clear that the "high dam" operating condition was untenable, and the operating height was lowered from 340 meters to 315 meters. Chou stated, "It should be publicly announced that Wen Shanzhang {the leading "low dam" advocate) was right, we were wrong, and his reputation should be rehabilitated." However, even with the lowered dam height and permanently opened discharge tunnels, by October 1964 the reservoir was still capturing 45 per cent of the silt coming in, and had accumulated 4.7 billion tons of silt. In 1964, Premier Chou approved an emergency plan to remove four of the eight turbines in the power plant, so that their penstocks and tailraces could be used to channel and discharge sediment. In addition, two new sediment discharge tunnels were built at the side of the dam.

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Although the accumulation of silt in the reservoir slowed after completion of the project in 1968, it continued unabated upstream on the Yellow and Wei rivers. In 1969, as the Cultural Revolution raged, it was agreed that there was no choice but to take the final possible measure short of decommissioning the dam: adopting Huang Wanli's recommendation to unplug the eight temporary diversion tunnels that had carried the Yellow River under the dam site during construction and use them for sediment discharge. They were unblocked at a cost of 80 billion yuan. The dam's operating height was once again lowered, this time to 310 meters. The San Men Xia facility survived as a minor provincial power plant, contributing little to downstream flood control and still a source of trouble to the upstream river and tributaries.

For Shaanxi, the San Men Xia bill came due in 2003. A relatively minor flood – rainfall at the once-in-fifty-years level – caused the worst flooding in the region since the year 1556. It inundated five counties, affected 560,000 people, forcing 200,000 to flee, destroyed the homes of 129,000, and caused damages of 2.3 billion yuan. In the aftermath of the flood, the Ministry of Hydrology admitted that the Wei – which had never needed levees or dikes in the past – had now become a "hanging river," and the San Men Xia reservoir bore the primary responsibility. Zhang Guangdou, at one time the responsible technician for the project, admitted frankly the San Men Xia reservoir was a mistake and power generation and water storage should be halted immediately; his call was echoed by the retired Minister of Hydrology Qian Zhengying.

However, as of 2010, to the intense resentment of Shaanxi, the operators of the power station at the dam (a business venture controlled by the downstream province, Henan) still maintain the water level behind the dam in order to drive the generators (which bring in upward of 200 million yuan of revenue to the province). Meanwhile, Shaanxi province is frantically building dikes and levees on the Wei and its tributaries with central government assistance, so it can survive the next major rainstorm without a history-making catastrophe. The conditions now apparently exist for decommissioning the San Men Xia Dam and ending its reign of error on the Yellow River. In 2000, China completed the Xiaolangdi Dam, constructed on one of the three sites reviewed by the Army Corps of Engineers team in the 1940s. It performs the flood control function that the San Men Xia Dam could have – and should have – performed, but could not because its reservoir silted up.

This behemoth cost $3.5 billion to construct and was built with World Bank assistance. Most people outside China have never even heard of Xiaolangi. For a Chinese dam, this is probably a good thing. Unlike China's other big hydrology projects, such as the Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze and the South-to-North water diversion projects, Xiaolangdi – possibly because of its intrinsic merits and also possibly because it offered the West a slice of the pie through the World Bank – has not attracted the vociferous opposition of anti-dam activists. The dam is constructed according to silt-control and discharge principles. The reservoir is designed to hold 10 billion tons of silt – perhaps 20 years' worth. Every year, the dam stores up water and unleashes it in a violent 10-day burst that is meant to sweep accumulated silt all the way down the river to the Bohai Gulf, scouring the riverbed of additional silt along the way. The spectacular cataract is something of a tourist attraction. It is not, however, a panacea. Flow into the Xiaolangdi Dam has decreased, bringing a welcome reduction in silt but not providing sufficient water for prolonged sediment discharge and scouring downstream.

Downstream, the Yellow River is a mess. Owing to a cycle of drought and intensive and growing water use for industry and agriculture in the lower watercourse, the Yellow River's water flow has been reduced by almost half. In one year in the 1990s, flow of the river into the Bohai Gulf was zero for 200 days. That translated into zero silt carried into the ocean, and further siltation-forming "double hanging rivers" – a new riverbed inside an old hanging river – in some localities. Downstream, the flood-carrying capacity of the Yellow River is less than half of what it was a century ago.

The first line of defense in flood control is the reservoir of the Xiaolangdi Dam. The optimists believe that, over the next 20 years, enough water will flow through the reservoir to keep its silt under control and sustain flushing operations sufficient to stabilize and possibly ameliorate conditions downriver. However, the Yellow River is a unique river, and the Xiaolangdi is an unprecedented hydrological experiment.

Chinadialogue.net, interviewed professor Wang Guangqian, an expert in hydrology:

"Wang Guangqian maintains that, despite this reduction, silt in the Yellow River has dropped from 800 million tons to 600 million tons in recent years – due, he says, to soil conservation measures, a reduction in rainfall, and the dams built to remove silt. But he also admits that silt regulation suffers from technical limitations and the results of the process are not ideal. The silt deposits in the Xiaolangdi Reservoir are hard to shift and, over the next 20 years, some way of dealing with the accumulated sediment will need to be found. Wang is not worried, 'At that point the silt will be higher and therefore easier to move, though control of water flow will be harder.'"

History will judge if China has finally found a solution to its Yellow River problem – or if Xiaolangdi is simply a slow-motion San Men Xia Dam. **CP**

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three years to become fed up with his attempts to gut social services in the country. The current protests focus on the regressive "reform" of the state retirement programs, but they go far beyond. We learned just a few days ago, thanks to the online newspaper *Mediapart*, that a financial group was recently created to offer "complementary retirement services" based on "capitalization" to those who find the present (or reformed) system inadequate. A certain Guillaume Sarkozy, brother of the president, directs the group and was a former number two of the MEDEF employers association.

Thanks to Nicolas Sarkozy, French people have learned much about the governance of their country. This is why they are now on the streets. **CP**

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sidelined Balls as Shadow home secretary, with a brief to attack the Coalition for being soft on crime, and appointed a mild-mannered trade union negotiator, Alan Johnson, as shadow chancellor. Johnson, who – like most of the shadow cabinet – had voted for the elder Miliband, had already aligned himself with the Brown government's plan to halve the deficit within four years, little different in substance from the Coalition's program. In the parliamentary debate on the Spending Review, he was reduced to weightless claims that the cuts were "ideological," at the same time saying Labour would support the benefit changes. Miliband himself has weakly called the cuts "a gamble."

In other words, cowardice is in command. The lightest touch of the media lash – "Red Ed in hock to the unions" – was enough to get the leader of the opposition squealing denials and denouncing "irresponsible" trade union action against the cuts. The only possible advantage of the younger Miliband is that politics may be messier. More New Labourites may despair of the party's prospects and follow Frank Field and John Hutton into lucrative government appointments. There is, after all, no reason in principle why Miliband's party should not join the Coalition. The last thing the European left needs is the perpetuation of any further illusions in New Labour.

Where are we now, on the path from September 2008? Two years of unprecedented stimulus – zero interest rates, a bank bailout of over £100 billion backed by a further government guarantee of £1 trillion, £200 billion of quantitative easing poured into government bonds – has brought no more than a flicker of growth to the U.K. economy, mainly confined to London. With a falling pound, inflation is higher than in any other OECD country; household debt is also at record levels. The cuts will indubitably make the situation worse; but there are no grounds for thinking that, without them, growth would ignite.

Staggeringly, the younger Miliband's victory over his brother in September's Labour leadership contest was greeted by some on the British left as a sign of hope.

The national economic model – Thatcher's answer to Britain's decline, nurtured by Blair and Brown – of an overblown City of London and financial services sector, spinning off crumbs for the former industrial regions, has now crashed. The working population, pensioners and students will be wrung out over the next decade to keep the City afloat; nothing will be flowing the other way. It will take a huge upheaval – going beyond the courage and determination of the 1926 General Strike – to break the tri-partisan electoral monolith dedicated to shoring up this broken model. **CP**

Susan Watkins is the editor of *New Left Review*. For earlier pieces on British politics, see "A Weightless Hegemony: New Labour's Role in the Neoliberal Order,"NLR 25, and "Blue Labour?", NLR 63. She can be reached at: editorial@newleftreview.org

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